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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of African-American families (N=10) that have one son in placement in a youth facility. The paper investigates the social context of behavioral problems among these Detroit youth, exploring the challenges faced by low-income minority families. Participants in the study described critical events in their lives, and recounted the paths leading to conduct problems. The youth elaborated on spirituality, social support, race, manhood, and prospects for the future. Some of the themes that emerged included the early absence of a parental, weak parental coalitions, early signs of impulsivity, and substance abuse. It was also found that living in transitional communities presented a challenge to the parents of these at-risk youth. The findings illuminate the confusion manifested in the acceptance of criminal identity and behaviors. Delinquency, for these youth, may also represent a series of system failures, such as the absence of early interventions for learning disabilities and family violence. The conditions of the study group are contrasted with the experiences of youthful offenders in South Africa. (RJM)

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Running head: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DELINQUENCY

The Social Context of Conduct Problems and Delinquency in Adolescence

The University of Michigan

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Based on a presentation made as part of the Symposium:
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Abstract

Family structure, stressful life events, and the experiences of a sample of African-American youthful offenders are the focal points of this paper. Information was obtained through pre- and post-release interviews with adjudicated African-American youths and their families. Participants recounted critical events in their lives, described the paths leading to conduct problems, and elaborated on views about spirituality, social support, race, manhood, and prospects for the future. Themes in this qualitative study include the early absence of a parent and weak parental coalitions as disruptions to family life and child development. Early signs of impulsivity were noted in these youth as was substance abuse. Additionally, living in transitional communities presents a challenge for parents, who found themselves surrounded by people with whom they were not allied. By taking into account the social impact of culture, ethnicity, and spirituality, the study reveals the confusion often experienced by African-American male youths.

The study illuminates the confusion that is manifested in the acceptance of criminal identity and behaviors. For African-American youth, delinquency may also represent a series of system failures: the absence of early intervention for learning disabilities, family violence, and loss. These are contrasted with the conditions associated with youthful offending in South Africa. South African youth seemed propelled toward delinquent careers by a sense of purpose and involvement in the struggle against apartheid. Aggression, and defiance of adult authority were channeled into community sanctioned resistance to state authority. Thus conduct problems associated with an undermining of adult authority was often consequential to involvement in peer-led resistance to apartheid. However, as the need for the liberation struggle subsided, South African youth loss this sense of purpose and instead were marginalized because of low educational achievement and gravitated toward criminal careers.

The Social Context of Conduct Problems and Delinquency in Adolescence

Students carry an estimated 270,000 guns to school every day (American Psychological Association, 1993, as cited in Schmittroth, Ed., 1994). In one city, Los Angeles, known for gang violence, there were more than fifteen hundred gang-related homicides between 1985 and 1989 (American Psychological Association, 1993, as cited in Schmittroth, Ed. ,1994.) Additionally, in 1989, over fifty thousand juveniles were in juvenile institutions for delinquent offenses (U.S. Department of Justice, 1989, as cited in Schmittroth, ed., 1994). Statistics, however, fail to convey some crucial information about the origins of serious conduct problems such as delinquency. What set of conditions— personal, developmental, social, familial, and economic, give rise to delinquent behavior? How do these youthful offenders view their behavior? Do they have views about the etiology and the factors that move them along criminal pathways? Why, in their own words, do they shoplift, bring firearms to school, get arrested for assault, and participate in other delinquent activities? At what age do caregivers first recognize delinquent behaviors and where do they turn to for advice on how to care for these youths? By speaking to caregivers and the youths themselves in open-ended interviews, the present study intended to better understand juvenile delinquency among a sample of African-American families with one son in placement in a youth facility. The study investigates the social context of behavior problems among a sample of African-American youth in Detroit and seeks to increase our understanding of the unique challenges facing low-income minority families. What are some of the characteristics of the families of these youthful offenders? Who are the most important people in their lives, what are their beliefs about the future, racial identity, effective ways of coping with adversity, and about the treatment they receive at residential treatment facilities? This study seeks to find preliminary answers to some of these questions.

Method

Participants

Interviews with ten African-American families with one son receiving treatment in the Boysville network in either Ohio or Michigan were conducted from 1995-1997. Caregivers and youths were interviewed. Eight of the caregivers in the study were identified as the mother of the youth, one grandmother was interviewed, and one father served as the primary caregiver. Interviews were conducted at residential treatment facilities in Michigan and Ohio, and in youth's homes in the Detroit area. Two Ph.D. level psychologists, and 2 psychology graduate student conducted the interviews. Participants were notified that their participation would in no way effect their treatment, that their responses were confidential, and that they could refuse to participate or discontinue the interview at any time. Participants were notified that a specific threat to harm another person would result in a report to the authorities or the individual threatened and that mention of danger to any child in the home was required, by law, to be reported. Caregivers were compensated for their participation at pre- and post-release interviews, and youths were compensated only at any post-release interviews that occurred. For some families, both youth and parent were interviewed pre-release and post-release. Difficulties in follow-up such as phone disconnection, moving, or scheduling problems prevented this from occurring as planned for other families; thus for others, the family was only interviewed once or only the caregiver, not the youth, was interviewed.

Interviews

Participants were asked to outline the youth's childhood years and delinquent activity during the tape-recorded interviews, typically lasting 90-120 minutes. Caregivers were asked to describe such issues as the child's performance in school, their parenting style, the family constellation, views on spirituality and race, and thoughts on their son's placement. Youths were asked to describe feelings about placement, and discuss their views on spirituality, coping, and racial identity. At follow-up interviews, parents and youths were given an opportunity to discuss progress, treatment effectiveness, social support networks, and other issues concerning any changes in delinquent behavior since leaving the treatment facility.

Results

The transcripts of interviews were organized and coded around several major themes: delinquency behaviors, delinquency and substance abuse in the family system, feelings about community resources, thoughts on parenting, issues concerning school attendance, views on coping and specifically spirituality as a way of coping, views on racial identity, and feedback on the social service system and specifically the facility where the son was placed.

Delinquency Among Youths Interviewed

Gun possession, sexual assault, assault and battery, gang membership, shoplifting, auto theft, car-jacking, smoking and selling marijuana, breaking and entering, and truancy comprise the delinquent behaviors in the boys we interviewed. This list is common and not surprising. What may be surprising, however, is what we learn about the reasons behind the delinquent behaviors and the emotions felt while committing these acts. One youth describes his feelings about his first breaking and entering:

> The first B and E (Breaking and Entering), I was like, you know, this ain't nothing it ain't even scary. The second one, when he brought me to the girl house to get all the guns and stuff, that it didn't scare me, while we was in the house, it was just exciting. That was real. It scared me when the police pulled us over, because first cop that jumped out he was like you know, move and die. I was like, ah, we out here in a white neighborhood, we all Black in this car, they're about to kill us. He was like you move you die. I'm like oh, my God. He was like, stick your hands out the window. I'm sticking my hands out the window, he just yanked me out the car and threw me in the back seat and searched me and stuff...

We get more insight into the emotions felt while committing offenses when we speak with juveniles directly about their delinquent activities.

In addition to understanding emotions surrounding delinquent activity, one of the goals of the study was to understand the origins , development and stages of delinquent behavior from the perspective of youth and their families. One mother states that her son always had problems with his peers from the age of about 6, when he returned home after having been kidnapped by his biological father. Certainly, she feels that this kidnapping incident was a major precipitating factor in her son's emotional problems and subsequent delinquency. For a surprising number of youth, personal safety and security were cited as other reasons behind delinquency. Sometimes the fear emanated from encounters with peers, other times from within the family. One son declared that he carried a gun due to fear that his father would return to the house and abuse him and his mother, as he had allegedly done in the past. Negative peer influence was another reason some mothers gave as the cause of delinquent behavior. One youth said that revenge on neighborhood enemies was one reason he got involved in the fighting that lead to the assault and battery charge. Additionally, adoption of materialistic values seems to be at the root of some youth's involvement in crime. One father observed that the desire to be well-dressed, to have status or fit in with peers on the basis of material possessions

initially prompted his son to sell drugs. The father refused to buy $150 gym shoes and believes that the desire to wear expensive clothing instigated some of his son's illegal behavior. Another mother echoed this sentiment and declared that her son's impatience and desire to be well dressed prompted his first delinquent act at the age of 10- shoplifting. This particular son was more specific in stating that the desire to be fashionable was a factor, but that he also would shoplift to hurt his mother and to make her angry and feel bad about herself because as a single parent she could not afford the things he wanted. He also stated his sexual abuse as a reason he sought material things to make himself feel better. Certainly, in order to understand what interventions might work in the reduction of criminal activity by juveniles, we must understand why the behaviors occur. For example, if youths carry guns illegally in order to protect themselves, making neighborhoods and schools safer is a practical intervention that could reduce illegal activity.

Delinquency and Substance Use in the Family System

Family histories of substance abuse and delinquency are common in our cases. One boy describes an incident where he would drink with cousins. The youth reports that a drug dealing father would hide crack in the house and that the youth accidentally ingested it and had to go to the hospital. One mother describes violence in the home after her son's father would drink on the weekends. Another mother admits to having a crack cocaine problem herself when her son was young, and a different youth describes being cared for by others because his mother had a cocaine problem, from which she is still recovering. Yet another mother no longer cares for her children; a grandmother does because of the mother's alleged substance abuse problems. In the majority of families, participants refer to the presence of drug or alcohol misuse in the family. What we learn is that the negative influence does not just come from peers; it can come from other family members, sometimes the biological parents. When treating addicted youths, then, it is important to

understand the family context as a potential factor in the cause or maintenance of addiction.

Just as we see substance abuse throughout the family, we also see some evidence for the notion that criminal activity "runs in families." In our study, one family member of a youth, a cousin, exposed the boy to car theft and is currently incarcerated for murder. Another mother describes having brothers who are addicted to drugs, one brother who is in jail, and another son with similar delinquent behaviors to the son we interviewed. In another case, the youth's sister is currently incarcerated for murder, and in yet another case, the youth involved his older sister in one of his major delinquent activities. It is certain that these children were raised in environments where they were no stranger to delinquency and substance abuse in and around the home. Thoroughly investigating the familial context in which youthful offenders develop can produce insight into the roots of delinquent behavior and can help us develop better intervention programs that treat the family as a whole and not just the juvenile.

Feelings about Community Resources

Our participants offered observations about the perceived breakdown of community and a resulting dearth of resources in their predominately African-American neighborhoods, neighborhoods already infested with drugs, alcohol, and unemployment. One mother expressed concern over watching the neighborhood deteriorate over the years. Another grandmother expressed a concern that children these days don't seek their parents approval for the friends they have. Neighbors don't seem to communicate anymore about their children, these parents are telling us. The notion of community as extended family, maybe a notion killed by the more impersonal (and dangerous) nature of today's neighborhoods, is an ideal to which parents and grandparents still cling. Its absence is cited as a cause for some of the problems among teenagers today.

Additionally, parents have thoughts on community discipline. In the past, several caregivers stated, community members were permitted to get involved with the discipline of other people's children if they witnessed inappropriate behavior. Now, however, community members are afraid of getting involved for fear of actually being injured themselves by the youths. Getting involved is another antiquated notion in some low-income areas of the city; it is simply too dangerous. "Now days it's like people scared to say something to somebody's kid. You say something to him, the kid might pull out a gun and shoot you. The parent might come down here and want to shoot you, " one caregiver said. The fear of disciplining one's own children even exists. Children know these days that they can claim abuse if their parents dare to physically discipline him. Greater sensitivity concerning child abuse causes many parents in the study to be concerned about whether they will be labeled abusive and have their children taken away from them. One father had this experience and had his 3 children removed from the home for 1 year. The issue of the fear of physical discipline reappears and is relevant in other areas of this paper.

Other ideas about the community were presented. One mother discusses the stresses that moving places. For various reasons, many caregivers have moved throughout the Detroit area. However, even when one moves into what one thinks is a better neighborhood, the sense of security does not necessarily increase. One mother, defeated by neighborhood factors, expressed her frustration and view of the futility of her own efforts to deal with negative community influences on her son:

> You know how you move from one neighborhood out of a bad neighborhood with drugs and shooting and all of that. You move to a better neighborhood, and the folks is not any better. Only thing different is in the old neighborhood I knew all the low lifes.

Additionally, parents discuss how difficult it is to get early and effective help for children. They are quick to cite the absence of Black male role models in the

community as precipitating factors in their son's delinquency and wish that more mentorship programs for Black males existed. They say that organizations like Big Brother, Big sister have waiting lists that are too long. Other social services, two mothers said, only appear to accept boys only after they have gotten into trouble and have criminal records. Getting affordable therapy or some sort of assistance when delinquent behaviors were just beginning and not as serious was difficult. Unfortunately, families can no longer rely on volunteer organizations and helpful neighbors within the community to provide the support and assistance they need in child-rearing.

Thoughts on Parenting

Several observations on the instability of family life and its effects arise in our interviews. We see a lack of permanence in family constellations. Mothers worry about whether they are raising children well, but the human and material resources they have to do so are often quite limited and change frequently. For example, families often begin as 2-adult household with both biological parents, but various circumstances such as domestic violence (one mother alleges that her ex-husband shot at her), drug problems, or death ended the marriage or relationship, leaving one caregiver to take care of any children that were produced from the union. Consequently, single parenthood produces many changes in living conditions, and a variety of emotions come forth when the biological father is no longer interested or able to care for his son.

In addition to the rifts with the biological father which may minimize continuous contact with the father and prevent any meaningful involvement of the father in guiding the child's development, single mothers often must work long hours outside of the home. This contributes to the child's perception that the mother too is not there for the children, a perception that has merit. Thus the children may grow up not only with a clearly absent biological father but may

perceive the custodial parent, the mother who has to work outside of the home, as being preoccupied and unavailable as well. Many mothers in our study felt conflicted, and one particular mother, when her son's delinquent behavior began, stopped working so she could keep and eye on him, monitor his behavior more and keep him on the straight and narrow more effectively. Juggling the demands of single parenthood with the financial necessity of work outside the home is a difficult task.

In the families who participated in the study, we see a variety of family arrangements, structures and constellations. We see mothers who have children by several different men, multiple marriages, mothers who never marry the father of their children, grandparents caring for the child when biological parents cannot, children living with the father after a separation, and children living with the mother after a separation. In one case, mother's new boyfriend treats her existing children well. In another case, father's new girlfriend mistreated the youth. In yet another case, the youth alleges that his mother's boyfriend had a son who raped the youth. The boys in our study were raised in various kinds of families and the structure of the family appears to change quite frequently.

What kinds of discipline do these parents use and where do they learn their parenting skills? This was another major focus of the current study. Of interest was whether caregivers treat their children the same. Most mothers stated that they treat their children differently depending on the temperaments of the children. Consequently, punishments vary. Punishments range from revocation of privileges (no telephone, no television) to more violent and coercive methods such as physical restraint, with spankings being frequently utilized as well. This form of discipline gets some of our caregivers into trouble, however. Often without the time or the resources to give their children constant supervision, parents react to situations after they occur and use more coercive forms of discipline to stop the behavior. Our father in the study, after "whooping" his daughter with a belt for

staying out late, left bruises on her and subsequently had his children removed from the home. This father, insisting that his children were clothed and fed and were never abused, hinted that the relationship that he had with his children after they returned to the home changed. How do we make the distinction between child abuse and spankings, which fall well within the rights of parents to administer? How can parents, some of whom work late hours, discipline children quickly and effectively when the ways they were disciplined, the only ways they know, are frowned upon in our society? When social workers come into the home after a parent uses what he or she considers to be necessary discipline, parents feel stripped of their rights to parent as they wish. They are frightened to administer the discipline and control they feel is greatly needed for their youth, youth who are seemingly out of control. This, in turn, may have a dramatic and deleterious effect on the bond between parent and child. While we intend to protect youth from legitimate neglect and abuse, what we may actually be doing is alienating well-meaning parents, parents who simply need new skills, from their children. Children who may do well in the home if the parent receives a parenting course are instead removed from the home for months, resulting in permanent changes in their relationships with their parents.

Where do these parents learn their ways of discipline and get information on how to parent? Parents (and grandparents) learn how to parent from their own parents; from parenting classes, sometimes required by law; from neighbors; and from books, although, as one parent put it, "People write a book on you, you should do this and that and that. You can't really go by a book for parenting because each situation is different." If each child is unique, if the methods caregivers rely on to discipline are considered child abuse, and if their own parents and other family members are not the best role models and sources of information, what are the means from which these parents can acquire appropriate and efficacious strategies for raising their children? This question begs for a response form community

leaders, developmental specialists and human service workers. Few would dispute the claim that the resources available to the single African-American mothers are inadequate. How then can we provide resources—information and support that is relevant to the situation these African-American families?

Additionally, of interest was teenage pregnancy in these families. The cycle of teenage pregnancy among our participants repeats itself from generation to generation. Several of the mothers were teen mothers themselves, and the father in our study became a father at 17. One youth in the study impregnated a girl who allegedly had an abortion at the sixth month. Another boy fathered a child by a young girl his grandmother did not approve of, and another one of our youths became a parent as a teenager as did his sister, who gave birth as a senior in high school. One wonders how the cycle of teenage parenthood continues, considering many of these youths know from first-hand experience the effects of being raised without one or both parents and were raised themselves by teenage parents. Do these boys realize the consequences of early sexual activity and comprehend the dangers of unprotected sex? One argument could be that no, they do not. Another argument however, summed up by one youth, presents the possibility that they do indeed comprehend the risk of unprotected sex. One boy describes his girlfriend's abortion and the fact that he could have made a difference in this unborn child's life: "Um hum. It do still make me mad when I think about it because, you know, I could have someone that's a part of me. I could help do the right things to make a difference." Perhaps these boys continue with the sexual behaviors *because of* the awareness of the consequences. Having something to leave behind and take care of may feel like a burden to many teenagers, but to these boys, it is a badge of manhood and an opportunity to create for their child what they never had in their own lives. Did their own relationships with their fathers, often colored by neglect and outright rejection, motivate them to become fathers and rewrite history? Understanding

why these youths actually wish to become teen fathers may help us better phrase the messages we send to them concerning sexuality.

School Attendance

The school adjustment of youth provides one of the earliest and most consistent predictors of involvement in the juvenile justice system. Early school failure, disaffection with school by grade 5, tardiness then skipping in middle school and truancy in high school are prognostic though not absolute and perfect indicators of juvenile involvement. There has been interesting research generated about the link between learning disabilities and delinquency. Three major hypotheses exist. First, the school failure hypothesis posits that learning disability leads to school failure. School failure leads to a negative self-image, resulting in school dropout and delinquency. The second hypothesis, the differential treatment hypothesis, states that youth with learning disabilities and non handicapped peers receive different treatment by police, social workers, and other officials despite identical behaviors. The third hypothesis is that learning disabilities are accompanied by a variety of personality characteristics that predispose the youth to delinquent behaviors (Larson, 1988). All positions have their critiques. Some doubt whether learning disabilities cause delinquent behavior. When assessing reading disability, the most common of the learning disabilities, conflicting data exist and there is not enough data to prove that a reading disability causes aggressive or delinquent behavior, although it may worsen existing aggressive behaviors (Cornwall, & Bawden, 1992).

Despite controversies in the literature, to our parents, school failure was cited as being related to and possibly the cause of delinquent behavior. The failure of teachers and parents to recognize a learning disorder or difficulty frustrated our youths and turned them off to school, but, interestingly, the fact that a disorder was recognized also frustrated our youths. "Then there is the thing that children have

that if you are LD or Special Ed, you are dumb. So he didn't like that. So it was like, "I ain't going to no class. Kids say that I'm dumb and all that stuff," one parent said. Another youth, after having been mainstreamed after the identification of a learning disorder, did much worse in school. The lesson we learn from our youths is that ironically, regardless of whether schools successfully identify the learning problem, the self esteem of these youths is still in jeopardy. Students are embarrassed when they do not understand in school and are aware of why they are having difficulties, and they are also embarrassed when they are told why they have difficulties. The identification of special needs sometimes has a paradoxical effect; it may make the problem worse. Caregivers tell us that changes in the identification of learning disorders and the stigma associated with them in inner city schools are necessary.

What else do we learn about school from these families? We learn that enforcing school attendance became a major struggle for the mothers in our study. They told us of how they would drop their children off at the front steps and then be surprised when they got calls that their boys were not attending school. Often, our youths preferred to go visit girlfriends during the days when they decided not to attend classes. Many would smoke marijuana and go to a friend's house instead of going to school. Interestingly, however, the idea that school attendance is the key to avoiding delinquency is an illusion. Sadly, the schoolhouse is the cite of delinquency in our study as well. Mothers remembered fights at school and disobedience to teachers as the first few incidents clueing them into their son's conduct problems. The youths in our study reported getting in fights with classmates and hiding guns in lockers. One youth recalled a friend getting attacked in front of the school. Another participant described a typical day:

> We go get some marijuana, and either we'd still go to school under the influence and go through the hallways and get phone numbers from girls, smoke marijuana again in school, go to lunch, or leave school and go get something

> to eat and come back. By the end of the day either you ended up in a fight when you left early or get in some type of trouble.

One ponders whether the schoolhouse is a safe place anymore. How can we continue to tell our children that school attendance is the secret to avoiding fights and other delinquent behavior when the school is filled with people who utilize the school as a place to enact their delinquent impulses?

Interestingly, these families have given us information concerning the desire to attend private schools. One mother described her son as doing well in private school, but when he was removed from private school, his grades dropped. Another child could not afford to continue to attend private school and described his public school as "terrible" because he could not concentrate with the fighting and drug use that plagued the school. The negative environment that unfortunately characterizes many of our inner city public schools can transform children with potential into children who find negative peer groups and lose the enjoyment for school they had before. The safety and quality of education that private schools offer can make the difference between success and failure for high risk children. Unfortunately, single parents simply cannot afford the luxury.

Coping

How do the families in our study cope with adversity? They seek solace everywhere from the amusement parks to the casino, with comfort being sought in trips or shopping as well. As far as spirituality, on some Sunday mornings, we find many of our families in church, but other families prefer to read the Bible and pray at home to get through tough life events. Being preached "at" was distasteful to one mother and another mother was turned off to the church after having been raised by a very religious mother. Among those who do attend church, however, church was described as a place where individuals could not only practice their religion but

fellowship with neighbors, as well. A few mothers used their study of the Bible to guide them in their child-rearing habits while simultaneously utilizing the church community for everything from emotional support to day care. The church also was an outlet for one mother who did not work outside the home; she donated her free time to church projects. The importance of the Black church in the lives of these parents is clear. One mother used her religion to explain everything from her son's return from the streets to a relative's progress while in a coma to another family member in remission from cancer.

Despite their own religious beliefs, caregivers stated that it was hard to pass on these beliefs to their sons. The father in the study had no idea if his children knew about God, and other parents complained that children went to church but seemed to get nothing from attendance. In terms of daily life, coping for these youths typically consisted of fighting or blunting affect by the use of marijuana. Before arriving at Boysville, youths coped with frustration and problems by externalizing. After placement, however, many learned how to communicate more with peers at Boysville or turned to their mothers, siblings, or other relatives for support. It is clear that Boysville inspires change in these youths. Placement at Boysville, which requires youths to attend church, might also communicate messages about the power of spirituality in coping, messages that perhaps they are now ready to receive.

Many of the youths do have vague ideas about religion, believe in God, and are interested in various faiths. However, only a couple portrayed themselves as particularly religious. Most feelings about religion are summed up by one teenager who described his beliefs as "Christian and stuff like that, Baptist, and then sometimes I believe in um Muslim too. That's a big mess of 'em." Although nonspecific, religiosity or spirituality was occasionally utilized as a way of coping, allowing one boy to feel "clean" after the bad things he had done. Perhaps it is times of crisis and the awareness of the dangerous life that one is living that brings

forth a spiritual sense. One boy, with clear-cut religious beliefs, describes a turning point:

> One time I was at a pay phone at about 11:00 at night and these two dudes walked up and was like, give me your money. I didn't have no money on me, all I had was a ring, it was my girlfriends, they took that... They started walking, then his friend turned and aimed dead at my stomach and shot and I swear to God I was shot and I looked at my stomach, I didn't see no blood or nothing and I turned around and started running. It's still questionable, did he have, a blank or bullet or what, you know. Yeah, the Lord helped me that situation. That's all I can say.

The use of spirituality to make sense out of life events should not be underestimated. Perhaps the further development of meaning through religion or spirituality can assist the youths in better understanding their adverse surroundings and motivate them to change their behaviors. Garbarino & Bedard (1996) write about the importance of studying the life paths of violent youths to understand the role of spirituality in the prevention of social problems in these high risk children.

As Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow (1991) write, "One of the great challenges we face in dealing with children who live in situations of chronic violence and danger is to find ways to help them make sense of their experience and find the paths in their difficult journey that will increase morale and resilience...(382)" As ideological factors, the authors write, can sustain the ability to function under conditions of extreme stress, we can focus on helping children understand their experience better. The Nation of Islam does serve this function in some African-American inner-city communities. What we learn is that we can use religion or spirituality to help these youth better understand their situations and forge meanings from their traumatic experiences. The identification of existing spiritual ideas in inner city youth can help psychologists better understand and treat delinquent youth. Simultaneously, the further development of these ideas about spirituality can help these youths better cope with their environments.

There is one final observation concerning the inner moral life of these youths: some sense of a moral code already appears to exist for the youths in our study. If one takes a look at some of the crimes committed, one notices that the breaking-and- entering's occurred in places such as known drug houses. Part of what contributed to one youth's placement was his breaking into the school he attended to play basketball in the gym. The drug activity for the youth in this study overwhelmingly concerned the selling and possession of marijuana, an illegal, but less dangerous, substance. The assaults were of individuals known to assailants, and the youths were often retaliating against neighborhood enemies who had shot or injured a friend. The youths saw themselves as carrying weapons for protection. While the behaviors are still illegal and cannot be condoned, one begins to understand that the behaviors committed by these youth are not random; there is a pattern. One might initially imagine that life for these youths resembles the wild west where outlaws with no regard for human life and a complete absence of a moral code exist. Even in the midst of delinquent activity, however, there still is a sense that these youth are following a moral code of their own. A code of conduct already seems to exist for these youth, demonstrating to us that they would be open to interventions from adults in the community who wish to take the moral code the youths already use and expand it. That these youth are beyond hope and help is a perception that appears to be false, considering that they already seem to have developed a moral code of their own.

Racial Identity

Feelings about race emerged slowly after questioning. We did find stories where mothers spoke of overt job discrimination. For example, one parent said the following:

> Well, I went to this dry cleaning school to learn how to press, and I think like the first ('cause they help you find jobs after

> you graduate) four jobs I went to was like out in Grosse Pointe Park. It's like when they talk to me over the phone, and I told them how much experience I had, and I got my certificate and this and that. 'Oh, you're someone that we can use' and this and that. Then when I get down there, and they see I'm Black, 'Oh, I'm sorry. The position has already been filled.'

Another parent felt frustrated that his own grandmother, who cleaned houses for a White family in the South, had to refer to the children of the home, children who were young enough to be her own grandchildren, as "sir" and "ma'am." One parent even stated that "the White man with the pen, with the power" prevented her son from having his reading problems recognized, although she knew that as he was moving from junior high to high school that he had great problems reading. She discussed a general hatred of Whites since an incident where schoolchildren called her "nigger" when she was a girl. She also can recall an incident where she felt discriminated against in a restaurant. There were a few incidents that caregivers described where either the caregiver or the children had experienced some form of discrimination, and these experiences shaped their mistrust of Whites. There was also the use of racial attributions in a small number of cases to explain negative events.

What else did these families have to say about race in America? Parents quoted statistics and said that what troubled the African-American community was a lack of Black male role models. Former husbands or the fathers of their children were not adequate role models, and drugs, jail, and irresponsibility were taking even more of the men away from their responsibilities as fathers.

Despite some disappointment in the state of the Black community and race relations and disappointment in their own experiences with discrimination, caregivers stated that what they ultimately wanted to teach their children about race was that what was more important was how people treat each other; not the race of individuals. All in all, our parents displayed an attitude of tolerance, insisting that

race relations would improve if we all treated one another how we each wished to be treated.

What is also interesting, however, is that we found that a couple of parents had difficulties with other African-American people, not White Americans. One mother described another African-American woman's fear that a third African-American employee would take her job. Interestingly, competition between minorities may cause rifts in the community. One youth described an interesting distinction he made between African-Americans and Blacks. African-Americans were people who kept jobs, owned their own businesses, and lived in the suburbs. Blacks were the ones in the streets. Another mother told us that young Black men who kill one other are worse than the Ku Klux Klan and that she would feel more comfortable on the street amidst a group of White males than amidst a group of Black males, who might try to rob her. In short, not only could families describe the rifts that exist across races, but they could describe the divisions that exist within their own community.

What do the youths have to say about race? Some of these youths search for racial explanations for unfair treatment from Whites and other non-Black minorities. This is an interesting issue. Crocker & Major (1989), in a review of the social psychological literature on stigmatized groups, state that members of stigmatized groups have strategies for protecting self-esteem. One strategy is to attribute negative feedback to prejudice against one's group rather than to internal, stable, and global reasons. Similarly, Franklin (1992) writes that African-American males are socialized to solve their own problems and to never drop defenses in front of White people, whom they often do not trust. Whereas willingness to readily attribute negative events to discrimination and mistrust of the dominant White society may be viewed as a protective factor for some minorities, an article by Biafora, Warheit, Zimmerman, Gil, Apospori, Taylor, and Vega (1993) suggests that for African-American, Haitian, and Caribbean Black adolescent boys, racial mistrust

of Whites and conventional forms of delinquency are related. What is the link between the two? When one mistrusts and devalues the dominant culture, one may reject its norms such as school success, norms that, if broken, can be related to delinquency. Certainly, a feeling of mistrust exists for our African-American teenagers in this study. Mistrust of members of the dominant culture may indeed be related to delinquency in the boys in our study, although how is unknown. This deserves further inquiry.

To continue with feelings about race, one boy described feeling bad when White people clutch their purses or are suspicious of him. Youths were quick to quote statistics concerning how many Black men are in jail, or have illegitimate children. Some state that they fit into these statistics and that the stereotypes that exist about them are the most negative things about being Black. One striking impression is that it is almost as if these African-American boys are aware of negative statistics and what the media has to say about them but are quite unaware of African-American history and their place in it. It seems that their understanding of African-American studies has been confined to the study of African-American criminology instead of the great legacy of Black inventors, scholars, and entrepreneurs. Black history for them seems to consist of the negative but relatively recent statistics of Black incarceration, not of the history of slavery, the fight for civil rights, and the remarkable resiliency of Americans of African descent.

There are two exceptions to this general impression, however. One youth expressed a keen awareness of his place in the African-American community. He acknowledged his responsibility to take every opportunity possible and share this with others. "If you get in because you the token make something of it. Get into that hire position to bring some more Black people in with you. That's how I see it. Like, the job I got now if I keep it when I go home get some of my friends in there, try to help them out. I'm all about trying to do something." Another teen did appreciate the opportunities that exist for African-Americans. He appreciates the

special programs that exist for African-Americans and sees being a minority as more of an advantage, actually. In the lives of these developing teenagers, however, all could benefit from some sense of their place in the community and the actions they can take to reject the statistics of which they are so aware. These boys and boys like them might benefit from programs at residential treatment facilities that educate these youths about Black history.

Feedback on the Social Service System

Although placement has separated these mothers from their sons and they have complaints about placement, most say that it has resulted in positive changes in their son's behavior. Having said that, the list of complaints could shed some light on how caregivers feel about the program. First, some parents felt uncomfortable about the staff refusing to let their sons come for home visits. One parent said her son did not like the food there. Another parent felt that the staff should test the youth for drugs when they come back from home visits instead of merely searching them, and a few parents did not like the health care received by their boys . Additionally, one particular mother had negative words to say about specific workers. However, even she still felt that her son was doing better since being placed, better than he had ever done at any other program. Although, upon follow-up, he did re-offend, she hoped that the memory of placement and how uncomfortable he was would eventually change him. If we were to summarize the findings up to this point, the most negative feedback (both pre- and post- release) came from the one family in which the youth had run away and reoffended after returning into the home. The mother of this family reports that because of her uncooperative attitude with the staff, the aftercare that the agency typically provides was denied to her son. Perhaps this lack of aftercare was related to his problems

upon release. The relationships caregivers maintain with the facility may be crucial in understanding re-offending after release.

One mother also had another interesting criticism that touches on culture and another parent in our study agreed. A central aspect of the program is a positive peer culture whose goal is to engender the conviction that if each boy must be accountable to the next, that a sort of positive peer influence could result. This involves both positive and negative group contingencies. Therefore, the indiscretions of one boy have an effect on all of the boys in his group. Each boy is responsible to his group and pledges to conduct himself appropriately, as his behavior reflects on the group at all times. One mother said the following:

> And, I don't think that's right either. Because when the child gets released, all them other kids is not coming home. It's going to be one child, and I think that's teaching all wrong. You cannot be responsible for nobody else. You cannot be responsible for nobody but yourself, what you do.

Another youth agreed that the actions of one peer can mess it up for the rest of the group, and he said this was the worst aspect of his treatment. "And that's the bad treatment because that blocks out your way to do what you got to do because you too busy worrying about what somebody else gonna do now, you know?" How useful is it to teach these African-American youths to be responsible not only for themselves but for their peers? Don't the realities of inner city life dictate that survival depends on taking care of oneself and not paying attention to the negative behaviors of others? As the youth quoted above put it, concentrating on what others are doing might interfere with what he needs to do for himself.

This issue touches on a larger critique of treatment facilities for youthful offenders. How useful, for example, are boot-camp style facilities (of which the facilities in this study are not a part) at reducing recidivism or improving positive adjustment? Henggeler and Schoenwald (1994) view boot camps, training schools, wilderness camps, and psychiatric hospitalizations as inappropriate solutions for

addressing the multiple correlates of antisocial behavior. Crime, they state, will not be reduced by programs that remove youths from their communities and instill a set of behaviors that are not applicable in the youth's natural environment. These youths will only return to the same unchanged environments from which they left, environments that contributed to the delinquency. Again, although Boysville is not a boot-camp type facility, the advice is useful. We must be more aware of the kinds of treatment that delinquent youths receive. Will the treatment translate to their home communities or will the behavior be extinguished after leaving the facility?

The mother who expressed a concern over the positive peer influence aspect of the program brings up a legitimate point concerning culture and the wisdom of teaching these African-American youths to be responsible for other people when it is precisely a preoccupation with what peers are doing that can contribute to delinquent activity. Making youths conscious of others and giving them a sense of community responsibility is undoubtedly important. However, treatment facilities might wish to consider whether they are fostering this sense of community awareness in ways that can realistically translate to the youth's home community. The mother that had the most negative feedback about the program recalled that her son returned home with a poor sense of how to conduct himself in the home community. She recalled that he acted inappropriately when trying to purchase an item at a store and that more training on how to act in community schools and businesses is truly needed. The Boysville community might be too artificial; what the boys really need is training that is meaningful and useful at home.

The negative feedback must be tempered with a quote such as this one from one mother, however. "I really love the program. It's good. I would recommend it to anyone. " That is glowing praise for a program, indeed. In terms of changing the program, some of the constructive feedback given included making the campus more secure, and another suggestion was that having former residents come back and speak to the boys about life after placement, addiction, and recovery would be a

good idea. Another parent agreed that having youths who have successfully completed the program come back and speak to current residents would be a good idea. Perhaps past residents could serve as mentors for the youths who are currently placed.

What are the most beneficial aspects of placement in the residential treatment program? Overwhelmingly, parents state that not having to worry about where their sons are at night is the most positive aspect:

> At one particular time I had both sons locked up, and that was the best time of my life.... I was at home by myself, just me, my house, my car, and my dog. No womens calling asking for ya all day long. It was peaceful. The phone bill was down, light bill was down, food bill was down...No. I was worried when they was in the street doing wrong. That way you can't sleep at night, stomach get upset and nervous. Your hair turns gray; then you have to dye it, you know, different things like that.

One grandmother said that she didn't have to worry about her grandson being killed or killing someone else on the street during placement. Another mother echoes the sentiment when she says, "He could have got killed. You know, then instead of going up to Boysville to visit him, I would have been going to the cemetery, and I don't think that I would have been able to deal with that." The most positive thing about placement, overwhelmingly, was a sense of security for these parents.

Sons say that one of the most positive things is the education that the program provides and the expectation that the residents will get their GEDs and perhaps go on to community colleges in Washtenaw County. From follow-up, it does appear that this is the case with some of our participants. Youths leave Boysville with a greater understanding of the possibility of college and realistic ways of winning funding. Another positive aspect, expressed by many boys and their caregivers, was a newfound ability to express themselves in dealing with family conflicts. The youths were pleased that they learned how to talk about their

problems with their family rather than violently displacing their anger onto peers. This kind of insight into their own experiences and feelings about them is one of the greatest gifts these boys received as they look back on their placements.

Of course, few want to be placed, and some youth were angry that they were in placement while other friends, whom they felt had committed worse offenses, were free. However, without placement, many would not have that extra attention and incentive to finish high school or get their GED's. It is hard to tell who will benefit from treatment. Sometimes, the benefit of placement is only realized years afterward. How can programs insure that their efforts will not go in vain? These boys seem to be telling us that it is beyond the control of the facility and solely in the hands of the youth. "The first couple months I was just thinking that I'll do my time and get out like that then I decided that I'm getting older and I might as well turn around now...One day I just woke up and decided I was getting tired of this." Despite the noblest efforts of facilities like Boysville, sometimes the most powerful tool is looking at oneself in the mirror and consciously making a change.

If the youths could change anything about the program, they might have more family interactions and events at the facility. This appeared more than once. One youth expressed a concern that Boysville could prepare him more for reinsertion into the community by helping him interact more with his family while in the residential program. Also, some youths would like more job searching skills because many of them reenter the community with no job and no job prospects. Additionally, many wish to be better informed of how long they are to stay at the facility. There seems to be a great lack of communication concerning exactly how long they must reside there.

The families in our study have had experiences with the larger social and legal system, as well, and feedback on these systems is more negative. The police were criticized for wisecracking, which unbeknownst to them perhaps, can be perceived as serious disrespectful behavior, and for occasional brutality. Social

workers were criticized for looking down on the poor and for not showing up to appointments, and lawyers were criticized for not introducing themselves to the parents. More than one parent felt alienated from her son's court proceedings, and parents often did not know that their sons had to be in court until just a day or two beforehand. Additionally, parents felt that the aftercare program and its connections with other agencies could be strengthened. Although they expressed appreciation for the services received co-ordination with other agencies needs to be worked out. Parents wish to strengthen the tie between placement and the rest of the social service system. Despite frustration, plenty of parents were pleased with the help they had received. They described other case workers as friendly, judges as fair, and ultimately were looking for no more than a little respect for their sons from the social service system. How demanding is it to ask that social workers and lawyers introduce themselves to parents and become more accessible? When parents felt they were being respected, they generally had positive things to say about agencies with whom they had come into contact. When they felt they were not being respected, however, parents had a lot of negative feedback concerning the social service system. As stated earlier throughout the paper, the issue of the difference between child abuse and physical discipline makes caregivers uncomfortable. When parents feel stripped of their rights to discipline their children as they see fit, they feel that social workers and other agencies are working against them and failing to respect their rights as caregivers.

Discussion

The ten families in the study provided us with a variety of perspectives on African-American family life and some of the causes and results of delinquency. We learn that the early absence of a parent and weak parental coalitions among these families interfere with child development and are perceived as causal factors

in delinquency. When children begin to display conduct problems, parents often feel helpless in preventing or treating the negative behaviors. We learn that the youths in our study have a variety of explanations for their own delinquency, including the desire to protect oneself and the desire to be well-dressed and afford the things their single parents cannot buy for them. This can be contrasted to South African youth, who seemed propelled toward delinquent behaviors by a sense of purpose and involvement in the struggle against apartheid. Aggression, and defiance of adult authority were channeled into community sanctioned resistance to state authority. As the need for struggle subsided, South African youth lost this sense of purpose and instead were marginalized because of low educational achievement. The similarities and differences between juvenile offenders of various ethnicities and nationalities deserves further inquiry in future research.

More research to understand the lives of delinquent youths is certainly necessary in order to create prevention programs and more resources in the community for families who discover conduct problems in their children. We cannot list the delinquent behaviors and propose intervention programs unless we truly understand the reasons behind delinquency. For example, if we find substance abuse in family members, it becomes easier to understand and treat the juvenile's addiction problems. If we find parents exasperated at the lack of help they receive when they first recognize conduct problems in their children, we strengthen community-based programs and work toward improving neighborhood resources such as Big Brother, Big Sister or church support groups. Additionally, if children tell us that they carry guns to school because they are afraid for their personal safety, we can make schools safer by hiring more security agents and installing metal detectors. This may result in a reduction in the illegal firearm possessions for which many youths are adjudicated. When we talk to children about safer sex and they tell us that they want to become teenage parents, we need to rethink the messages we send about condom use and instead focus on the issues underlying the desire to be a

father. Are these youths producing babies so that they can create with their children a bond they never had with their own fathers? If so, counseling may be necessary to repair the disappointment and help the youths understand the implications of their sexual behavior. In other words, we must understand the social context of behavior problems and delinquency in adolescence if we hope to create better, more relevant intervention programs and improve on the programs that currently exist.

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